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SUBJECT: ECUADOR,S NEW ENVIRONMENTAL MINISTER MORE POLITICAL THAN ENVIRONMENTAL

REF: QUITO 0540

¶11. (SBU) Summary. President Gutierrez named Juan Carlos Camacho as the new Minister of the Environment on February 24, replacing the beleaguered Fabian Valdivieso. Camacho has no real environmental experience and was given the position to assuage the block of independent congressmen who hold the balance in Congress. Camacho is a political operator who is working for fishing interests in the Galapagos in order to secure their vote for the President. He has also promised to take action on renewing the contract of a Swiss firm that was monitoring illegal logging in Ecuador. At two different meetings (Reftel), President Gutierrez called for a balanced, sustainable solution to the Galapagos crisis. While we are optimistic about the President,s words, we are wary of Camacho,s alliances with the fishing sector. End Summary.

Bio Says A Lot

¶12. (U) Juan Carlos Camacho is more than anything a politician. He was twice a congressional representative for Bolivar province) first for the Concentracion de Fuerzas Populares (CFP) from 1988 to 1990, and then for the Izquierda Democratica (ID), from 1992 to 1994. During his second term, he left the ID and became an independent.

¶13. (U) In October 1994, then-legislators Simon Bustamante and Rafael Cuesta accused Camacho of being &the briefcase man& for the independents, implying that he was dispersing the cash used to buy the votes of independent congressmen. Camacho denies these allegations.

¶14. (U) Camacho has no environmental experience except that, as he put it in a post-nomination interview, he &has planted trees with his own hands& and &has a clear notion of what clean air is.&

Courtesy Call Reveals More

¶15. (U) The DCM and USAID Director paid a courtesy call to Camacho on March 8. The DCM congratulated Camacho on his new position and said the Embassy stood ready to help him conquer some of the many difficult problems he will confront. Galapagos was the Embassy,s top environmental concern and we were encouraged by the President,s recent attention to the Galapagos crisis and call for a 30-day plan to resolve it (Reftel). The DCM delivered our baseline message to Camacho -) that the Galapagos crisis is Ecuador,s to solve and that the international community wants to help Ecuador achieve its goals. The DCM also urged Camacho to quickly address park management instability, monitoring and enforcement in the marine reserve, income-generating alternatives for fishermen and illegal immigration.

¶16. (U) Camacho said he understood the need for action in the Galapagos and that he would take action, unlike his predecessor, who he admitted did not like to make decisions. Camacho would like to reform the Galapagos Special Law in order to stabilize and depoliticize the Galapagos National Park (GNP) Directorship. He rejected the DCM,s suggestion (as per the UNDP/IDB/USAID consultants hired to analyze this problem) that it could be done by presidential decree. Camacho admitted that there is a lot of politics surrounding the Galapagos, suggesting that he too was involved. He said he would meet with the Ministers of Tourism and Government soon, to reach a unified position on the Galapagos. He also said that violent demonstrations in the Galapagos need to stop. They damage the image of the islands and serve no one.

¶17. (U) The USAID Director noted the USG,s \$10 million investment in the Galapagos. He also agreed with Camacho that dialogue is important among the players, and to that end the fishing sector needs to rejoin the Junta de Manejo Participativo (JMP - a Galapagos planning and advisory board comprised of the conservation, tourism, government and fishing sector representatives). The fishing sector walked away from the JMP years ago citing conservation as the exclusive goal of the body. Camacho accepted the invitation from the USAID Director for a full briefing on USAID programs.

¶18. (SBU) The USAID Director also raised concern about the

GOE's failure to renew its contract with the Swiss firm SGS. SGS was given a contract in 1999 to monitor illegal logging in Ecuador. In 2003, bowing to pressure from powerful logging interest, the offices of SGS were closed and its contract allowed to expire. The parties resolved outstanding legal problems and the GOE agreed to renew SGS's contract. However, the GOE now claims it lacks the finances to renew the contract. Though, we believe the problem is more the lack of political will than finances.

¶9. (U) The DCM emphasized the extensive international interest in the Galapagos. The Ambassador has been there on numerous occasions; several US Senators (notably Dodd and McCain) have been there, as has former President Jimmy Carter. The previous Minister of the Environment had visited the Carter Center to lay the groundwork for an international forum. We stood ready to work with Camacho in that regard, the DCM added.

Meeting with Donors Confirms Our Opinion

¶10. (U) Acting on the President's orders (Reftel), Camacho convoked a meeting of donors. He started the meeting by saying that we must avoid any future strikes in the Galapagos, but added that the fishermen in the Galapagos have threatened to demonstrate if the sea cucumber season remains closed this month (March) without a viable income-generating alternative for them. The fishermen are pushing for long-line fishing as the desired alternative, otherwise come March 20 they will take to the streets.

¶11. (U) The Spanish representative spoke eloquently about the problems in the Galapagos (institutional instability, the need for sustainable development, illegal immigration) but said that harvesting sea cucumbers and long-line fishing were certainly not the answer. The other donors said that they wholeheartedly agreed with this assessment and noted that the March 20 strike date left little time for finding a lasting solution. The Interamerican Development Bank (IDB) representative suggested that the GOE put the artesanal fish processing centers they funded, which are fully constructed, into production. This could be done quickly and the products could be sold to tourists. Others tossed out medium-term ideas for fishing alternatives. One idea was to auction fishing permits to sport-fishing operators for tourists. The permits would be limited in number, but tradeable. Others spoke of raising park entrance fees and putting the proceeds in a fund to establish fishermen in other occupations. The donors suggested that we get all the players together (to include fishing and tourism sector representatives) to brainstorm and agree on specific measures.

¶12. (U) Though he listened, Camacho made no commitments, emphasizing that he is still in the learning process. He added that his predecessor did not leave good files on the Galapagos and that there was no one to advise him. He requested that Fundacion Natura and the Charles Darwin Foundation comment on fishing alternative proposals presented to the President during his trip to the Galapagos.

¶13. (U) Despite his professed steep learning curve, Camacho was prepared enough to present a proposal. As the meeting ended, he circulated his own proposed presidential decree that would require all tourists who visit the Galapagos to spend at least one night on land, would open the marine reserve to sport fishing, and (in an apparent jab at tourism magnate Roque Sevilla) would prohibit the use of submarines, or any kind of submersible naval vessel in the marine reserve (Sevilla wants to offer submarine tours in the Galapagos).

Comment

¶14. (SBU) The appointment of Camacho portends of further political expediency in the Galapagos. Camacho is aligned with the independent vote, and is rumored to owe his appointment to (former PSC) Independent diputado San Martin, who led the effort to dismantle the forestry control system. He and Vinicio Andrade, the pro-fishing diputado from the Galapagos, whose vote the President has courted, have also laid out a clear agenda in support of fishing interests in the Galapagos.

¶15. (SBU) Camacho's proposed presidential decree lacks balance, feasibility and ultimately will only minimally benefit fishermen. Our task will be to educate and guide Camacho toward more sustainable alternatives. The President's recent focus on Galapagos and public pronouncements give us cause for hope, but we need to see concrete actions. The Ambassador will also sign a joint communique to the MFA asking that the SGS issue be resolved as soon as possible, as the treatment SGS received does not bode well for other environmental NGOs operating in Ecuador.

KENNEY